

# A CLOSER LOOK

*Story by Ron Wilson*



## Battle of the Bighorns

Smack two wooden baseball bats together as hard as possible and that's what it sounds like. Ram your head into a brick wall and you'd assume that's what it feels like.

Fortunately for Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep, they have specialized skulls to protect brains that instruct males to butt heads, or clash, in the first place.

For many of us, bighorn sheep males rising on hind legs and then charging and ramming into one another is something we've seen only on TV. Wander around the badlands in sheep country often enough, however, and you stand the chance to catch the rutting ritual yourself.

Bighorn sheep rut in fall in western North Dakota, typically from October through November. Rut-like behavior among males in bachelor groups can be seen year-round, said Brett Wiedmann, North Dakota Game and Fish Department bighorn sheep biologist, but certainly intensifies as the breeding season approaches.

Clashing happens between rams of equal size, and the most likely participants are males about 5-6 years old looking to secure their dominance. The battle to move up the pecking order can be arduous – two rams clashed for 22 straight hours, a researcher documented – and sometimes not without cost. Noses are smashed, horns broken, ribs cracked and eyes punched from their protective sockets. Death is also a possibility.

If a bighorn ewe in estrus is hanging around, the confrontations between males can escalate. "That's when the ritualized stuff gets tossed out the window," Wiedmann said. "It's time for drop-down fighting." Blows to the ribs and other body parts are common.

The pecking order of males that hang together in summer is pretty well established. But look out when a newcomer shows up during the rut. "If rams don't know each other, the clashing is more intense," Wiedmann said.

The baseball bat sound between rams can prompt other males within earshot into doing the same. While surefooted for climbing nearly vertical terrain, the contests typically take place on even surfaces.

When bighorns are really getting into it, the venue is not a concern. Wiedmann said a western North Dakota sheriff once had to block traffic near Medora to keep motorists from driving through sheep clashing in mid-road, oblivious to what was going on around them. Another time, an onlooker filming a bighorn battle was chased by an aggressive male up a nearby tree.

Now that's better than TV.

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